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Tunis World Social Forum

Upon contact with reality at boiling point: positive chemical reaction

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The World Social Forum (WSF) wound up its ninth centralized edition on Saturday, 30 March in the Tunisian capital with a significant quantifiable end result. More than 50,000 participants, almost one thousand activities of many kinds; an opening march on Tuesday the 26th that brought out 25,000 people and a tightly-packed closing march in solidarity with the Palestinian people. "A very positive forum" according to the analysis of Belgian historian and activist Eric Toussaint, coordinator of the Committee for the Abolition of the Third World Debt (Comité pour l'Annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde - CADTM) member of the FSM International piloting committee since its inception.

Sergio Ferrari: What were the most important aspects of this new edition of the WSF?

Eric Toussaint: There was a strong Tunisian presence in many activities. For example, we observed this in the workshops and activities on the debt. Also in the Social Movements Assembly on Friday the 29th. The great interest youth and social movements showed towards this initiative was obvious. This is a very positive aspect of our evaluation.

Q: Does this mean that the WSF comes out of this Maghrebi session strengthened ?

E.T: No doubt about it. WSF has been going through an obvious crisis for some years now. In particular, its International Piloting Committee, as a facilitating body, has faced huge difficulties finding a new dynamic. At the same time, the Social Forum indisputably remains the only worldwide arena and framework where social movements can meet. In this sense, in the absence of an alternative, the WSF remains very important. Since Tunisian and the region's civil society remain actively mobilized, this is a breath of fresh air and renewal for this international occasion. The Social forum, in coming into contact with a society in movement, in ebullition, has produced a chemical reaction; a very interesting interaction that we have observed during this edition.

Q: According to your assessment, holding the WSF in a country and region in turmoil could also be a future antidote against any risk of institutionalizing this global occasion...

E.T: Precisely. We could imagine an upcoming edition of the WSF in Egypt if a group of organizations there proposed to host it. In fact, Egypt is experiencing a completely electric situation with a trade union movement proportionally stronger in the industrial sector than in Tunisia, with a peasantry hard-hit by the World Bank's neoliberal policies and land privatization; but social explosions could take place in other parts of the world and different scenarios are imaginable.

Q: How can the difficulties and the sort of paralysis faced by the WSF International piloting committee be unblocked?

E.T: I don't have these solutions. I see that a series of forces on the committee want to continue to play this role. Tunis teaches us that a certain point we have to free the terrain and make way for new forces. The CADTM will continue to be a member of the International committee, there are very interesting and dynamic players within it, with whom we collaborate closely. We also know that there is a series of very institutionalized forces that manage the Social Forum "Brand" according to their interests.

Q: Despite all this, you think that we should continue to strengthen it?

E.T: Without a doubt the WSF is useful. We can see, as happened here, that a very positive dynamic is developing independently of operational problems.

Q: Within this optimistic assessment, what are the negative aspects that emerge from this edition?

E.T: USAID was among the organizations that set up stands. It is a US cooperation agency present in all destabilization operations around the planet. It is an instrument of US government international policy. This organization has no reason to be at the Forum. This is cause for concern, all the more so as it involves a violation of the 2001 Charter of Principles. So I understand the participants who ejected this organization from the perimeter of the El Manar university campus where the Forum was taking place.

We have also seen - just as happened during the earlier 2011 Social Forum in Dakar - that the Moroccan monarchy sent a hundred or so individuals paid to pose as members of non-governmental and social organizations. Some of these were police, whose mission was to prevent anyone from raising the demand for an independent Sahrawian State We saw that in Dakar, and it happened once again on Friday the 29th at the social movements assembly... Provocateurs linked to the Moroccan regime swarmed the floor in an attempt to prevent any reference being made, in the Social Movements declaration, to the necessary solidarity with the Sahrawian people. This was another negative aspect, though it was not the WSF's responsibility. In particular, we have to find ways of defending Moroccan activists who have the courage to speak out for the democratic right to national sovereignty.

From Tunis, 30 March 2013

Translated by Marie Lagatta and Mike Krolkowski.